

Resisting a “New Normal” in the Taiwan Strait

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October 2022

At the end of September 2022, the National Committee on American Foreign Policy’s (NCAFP) Forum on Asia-Pacific Security (FAPS) convened another cross-Taiwan Strait Track II with a group of authoritative participants from Mainland China, Taiwan, and the United States. The discussion focused on the current state of cross-Strait relations, which all participants characterized as becoming more and more dangerous, especially following the visit of U.S. Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taipei in early August, the unprecedented uptick in military maneuvers by the Mainland in and around the Strait, and the suspension of several bilateral U.S.-China dialogues. In the current security environment, it is clear that increasingly divergent perceptions are shrinking the space for dialogue, making cross-Strait relations even more difficult to manage.

Key Takeaways and Recommendations

- No side appears to be recognizing their own role in driving the current escalation of tensions across the Strait. Taiwan participants noted a heightened possibility of war in the Taiwan Strait since U.S. House Speaker Pelosi’s visit on August 2, making it necessary for Taiwan to prepare for an act of war by China. Mainland participants, however, emphasized that recent Chinese actions are merely tactical and in response to Pelosi’s visit. More importantly, they do not indicate a change in strategy.
- Despite different interpretations of the status quo and recent events, participants from all sides worried about increasing militarization of the Strait and references to the current situation in cross-Strait relations as a “new normal.” U.S. and Taiwan participants believed that routine incursions by Mainland military assets over the “median line” in the Taiwan Strait should be reversed to avoid a dangerous “new normal.” Mainland participants saw Taiwan and U.S. actions with regard to military assistance to Taiwan and elevation of officiality in the U.S. relationship with Taiwan (including encouraging other countries’ elevation of such officiality) as destabilizing and dangerous. It was clear to the participants that such a “new normal” would make cross-Strait relations much more difficult to manage and would bring all sides very close to conflict.

¹ This report reflects the notes and reflections of the authors alone and is not a consensus document.

- A return to the “old normal,” no matter how politically difficult, is urgent. This would require three authoritative reassurances: Taipei should reassure Beijing that it will not seek independence; Washington should reassure Beijing that it will abide by its one-China policy and should forthrightly state for the public record what that policy is; and Beijing should reassure Washington and Taipei that it will stick to its policy of peaceful reunification. In addition, Beijing and Taipei should find ways of enhancing cross-Strait communication.
- In order to prevent near-term escalation in cross-Strait tensions, the readout of the next U.S.-China high-level meeting should include statements a) by the Chinese side that there is no decision for forced reunification and no timeline, that it maintains a policy of peaceful reunification, and b) by the United States that it remains committed to its One China Policy, does not support Taiwan independence and will not stand in the way of peaceful resolution of current differences, including possible unification, provided it is in accordance with the wishes of those on both sides of the Strait.
- Despite the tensions and disagreements, all sides agreed that there is an urgent need for private, direct, and substantive channels of communication at the Track 1, 1.5 and Track II levels in order to clarify intentions, share perspectives and manage dangers. The absence of functional communication channels, including those aimed at managing U.S.-China relations and avoiding war in the Taiwan Strait, and the nonexistence of official or unofficial dialogue between the Mainland and Taiwan, make it difficult to be optimistic about the improvement of cross-Strait relations.
- Some U.S. participants were cautiously optimistic that the current situation in the Taiwan Strait was not heading inevitably toward conflict and that official communication channels actually worked to prevent miscalculations in the context of the Pelosi visit. In particular, Beijing’s muted responses to recent U.S. arms sales, U.S. transits through the Taiwan Strait, and President Biden’s interview on *60 Minutes* were noted as possible indications of restraint.

Who is Changing the Status Quo?

Each side sees the other (or others) as changing the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. From a Mainland perspective, Washington and Taipei have been changing the status quo, and Beijing is only reacting to the situation created by the two sides. According to one participant, the status quo is based on the “political agreement and commitment that there is only one China, and that Taiwan is part of this one China.” As a result, the deterioration in cross-Strait relations began not with Speaker Pelosi’s visit but with the 2016 election of Tsai Ing-wen and her refusal to accept a one-China framework under the 1992 Consensus.

From one Taiwan participant's perspective, the status quo is based on peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait; Beijing has been changing it regardless of any actions taken by Taipei or Washington. Despite the Mainland's recent crossing of the median line and its squeezing of Taiwan's territorial space, Beijing has always been expanding and projecting its military power, even during previous KMT administrations.

A U.S. participant pointed out the stark differences in how the Mainland and Taiwan view changes in the status quo, and posited that this stems from the two sides having fundamentally different understandings of the status quo itself. The Mainland is focused on political signals and moves by Taiwan (and the U.S.) towards Taiwan independence. Taiwan, on the other hand, is focused on the Mainland's military maneuvers in the Strait, namely the crossing of the median line. Some participants observed that constant debates on changes to the status quo have devolved into a "blame game" among the three parties, which only contribute to worsening tensions and increasing risks of conflict.

Is there a "New Normal" in Cross-Strait Relations?

The public narrative shaped by quick-take headlines after the Pelosi visit to Taiwan seemed to imply a "new normal" in cross-Strait relations. However, participants from all three sides expressed concern that discussion of a "new normal" would only make tensions more difficult to manage. From a Mainland perspective, a "new normal" would involve a policy process that will result in a new round of deterioration in relations between the U.S. and China, as well as increased military tensions in the Taiwan Strait. Beijing sees that it is being dragged into a comprehensive competition with Washington, further exacerbating mistrust between the major powers and widening the threat perception gap in the Taiwan Strait.

Due to growing frustrations with the current state of U.S.-China and cross-Strait relations, a stark warning was issued: Beijing is likely to consider downgrading diplomatic relations with Washington if it believes the U.S. to be "hollowing out its one-China commitment." Because of Washington and Taipei's actions, Beijing ultimately feels less constrained by its policy of peaceful reunification and will thus respond accordingly, including through military actions, to deter Taiwan from pursuing independence. Another Mainland participant was especially worried that only a major crisis can reestablish a stable equilibrium across the Strait.

From a Taiwan perspective, there is grave concern that the "median line" in the Taiwan Strait that de facto preserved military stability and clear lines has now been erased or blurred, which will make conflict more likely. According to this participant, Beijing is pushing Taipei into a corner by redefining the status quo. This is a dangerous situation with a high chance of miscommunication, misunderstanding, and miscalculation. The "median line" should be de facto reestablished in order to restore stability.

U.S. participants noted that, in Washington, officials believe there is a need to ensure that Taiwan does not meet the same fate as Ukraine. However, there is no consensus on what that entails. Mainland participants expressed concern about the Taiwan Policy Act. In response, U.S. participants clarified that the “Act” does not restore diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (ROC) or alter the U.S. official position on the international status of Taiwan, and that it should not be construed as authorization of military force. However, it was still concerning to participants that the bill indicates support for Taiwan’s right to self-determination, and that its passage would therefore change U.S. policy.

What was evident from the discussions were the domestic challenges all three capitals faced. In Taiwan, the DPP will likely remain the ruling party for the foreseeable future. On the Mainland, there is growing frustration over Taiwan “moving farther away,” with increasing calls on Chinese social media for Beijing to compel unification. Overshadowing these dynamics is Washington’s fixation on competition with China. From a Mainland perspective, the Biden administration’s policy towards China has taken an ideological tone by focusing its foreign policy on promoting democratic values. As a result, the Taiwan issue has been redefined as an “identity issue” of democracy versus authoritarianism. Containment of China is thus no longer just about military or deterrence issues, as there have been greater efforts to frame China as an ideological rival. As such, Washington sees Taiwan as a “good instrument” to contain China. While a U.S. participant agreed that the framing of democracy versus autocracy was unhelpful because it shrinks the space for dialogue, they pushed back on the notion that Washington was using Taiwan to “split” or “contain” China.

What Exactly is US Policy on Taiwan?

Participants from both the Mainland and the U.S. expressed confusion and frustration over U.S. policy towards Taiwan. In an interview with *60 Minutes*, President Biden stated for the fourth time that the U.S. would come to Taiwan’s defense militarily; but most notable and concerning was his statement, made for the second time, that “Taiwan makes their own judgments about their independence...that’s their decision.” The latter statement contradicts the longstanding U.S. policy that the U.S. “does not support Taiwan independence.” A Mainland participant indicated a growing conviction in Beijing that the U.S. is now determined to oppose peaceful reunification. U.S. participants lamented that Washington is not speaking clearly about its own policies, and without a clear and consistent Taiwan policy, things are heading in a very dangerous direction.

One Mainland participant noted that whether or not Biden’s comments indicated a shift from “strategic ambiguity” to “strategic clarity” regarding a U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan, the debate surrounding this potential change in policy is not as important as the public debate in the U.S. makes it out to be. The PLA needs to plan against the worst-case scenario of a U.S. intervention, regardless of U.S. declared policy. However, Mainland participants still viewed President Biden’s remarks as dangerous because they will further encourage pro-independence sentiment in Taiwan and damage the Mainland’s “trust of the U.S. one-China policy.”

From a Taiwan perspective, however, there has not been a major shift in U.S. policy. U.S. policy towards Taiwan has consistently been one of dual deterrence: deterrence of the Mainland from taking military action or invading Taiwan, and deterrence of Taiwan from declaring independence. It was firmly believed by the participants from Taiwan that this policy has not changed for the last couple of decades.

One U.S. participant posited that the Mainland has been signaling to the U.S. and Taiwan that the two are close to crossing China's red lines, and that the Mainland is thus trying to reestablish credibility of those red lines through military exercises and punitive measures, including the suspension of dialogues with the U.S. Given the dynamic, however, limiting channels of communication only makes a crisis more likely. Channels of communication must be preserved and expanded, not further reduced, to avoid growing misperceptions of changing the status quo and to improve understanding and handling of official signaling and public statements.

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The NCAFP would like to thank the following organizations for their support of our work:

Carnegie Corporation of New York

Fubon Group

Henry Luce Foundation

MacArthur Foundation